

APPLICANT FEEDBACK SUMMARY
2014 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: Teach for America

Application ID: 14AC155947

Program Name: Teach for America Kentucky

For the purpose of enhancing our programs by improving the quality and quantity of applications to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), we are providing specific feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of this application. These comments are not meant to represent a comprehensive assessment; rather the analysis represents those elements that had the greatest bearing on the rating of the application. Please note that this feedback consists of summary comments from more than one reviewer. For this reason, some of the comments may seem to be inconsistent or contradictory. Comments are not representative of all of the information used in the final funding decision.

Reviewers' Summary Comments:

Strengths:

A strong case is made for the need to increase educational attainment levels in low-income areas in Kentucky. Educational indicators are provided showing that distressed areas of Appalachia experience the lowest levels of education in the nation (e.g., Kentucky is 50th out of 50 states for the percentage of college and career ready 11th graders, and only 23% of 11th graders meet educational benchmarks in low-income areas compared to 74% in wealthier districts).

A chronic need for highly qualified teachers in these areas exists due to vacancies, teacher drop out, and the inability to recruit teachers in the high-need subjects like math and science.

The need for improved educational outcomes among low-income rural schools in southeastern Kentucky is well documented. For example, the gap in ACT scores among the Teach for America (TFA) served districts and wealthier Kentucky districts is 51%.

The applicant effectively describes the gaps between wealthier Kentucky school districts and the TFA-served districts by showing the difference in achievement in various subject areas. For example, Teach for America-served districts scored 33% lower in English and 38% lower in math. The need for qualified teaching staff in the targeted school districts is persuasive and well-documented. The applicant provides an example of a chemistry teacher position that remained vacant for five years and a Spanish class that was taught by Rosetta Stone software because there were no qualified teachers.

The applicant clearly presents the need for AmeriCorps members to assist with teaching in low income rural schools across the central Appalachian School Districts in Southeastern Kentucky. Historically, education has been undervalued in Appalachia.

The applicant cites specific data to document the need. The ACT test scores reflect only 23% of students from the Appalachian partner districts in KY reach the benchmarks compared to 74% from the wealthiest counties in KY.

This explains the impact of the pronounced achievement gap related to low income students and higher income students. It also demonstrates the need for highly, qualified and diverse teachers in the Appalachian School Districts.

The applicant has provided evidence of the positive impacts on TFA teachers on student learning outcomes in a variety of grades (e.g., elementary to high school) and subject matters (reading and math). The studies were conducted recently by reputable researchers (e.g., Mathematica) from different parts of the country.

The applicant clearly documents that AmeriCorps members are an effective resource for providing quality education in low income schools. The applicant provides numerous examples of educational gains among students taught by TFA recruited AmeriCorps members.

The applicant provides a compelling argument for the effectiveness of AmeriCorps members by reporting principal satisfaction with TFA recruited teachers and their likelihood of recommending TFA teachers to other school leaders.

The applicant indicates that they have an inadequate number of teachers for teaching positions and some positions remain vacant well into the school year; therefore AmeriCorps members while developing career paths also address the problem of teacher shortages in rural areas and address a community need.

The TFA program has been an effective approach in increasing educational outcomes among students. A recent study shows that students taught by a Teach for America teacher learned 2.6 months more math in a year than students taught by non-TFA teachers. Another study conducted about 10 years ago found improvements in math skills, and a variety of quasi-experimental studies noted improvements in student achievement.

Additionally, AmeriCorps member principals are highly satisfied with the Teach for America program. One study found that 100% of principals in Appalachia were satisfied with the AmeriCorps members at their school and would recommend hiring such a teacher, and 93% claimed that Teach for America AmeriCorps members were more effective than non-TFA teachers.

Teach for America demonstrates an excellent track record of filling teaching positions in low income areas with qualified teachers as documented by principal approval in Appalachia.

The applicant clearly shows that AmeriCorps members are more effective at increasing educational gains in low income communities than teachers from other less selective alternative teaching programs. For example, students taught by Teach for America teachers learned 2.6 months more math in one year.

The research shows that using AmeriCorps members in rural areas is a more effective way of increasing student achievement and outcomes in low incomes communities than teachers from other teaching programs.

Weaknesses:

Specific grades (e.g., elementary, high school) and subject matter (e.g., science, math) where needs are the greatest are not pointed out, hence it is not clear where the Teach for America AmeriCorps members will be placed.

The logic model lists outcomes that are not described in the narrative, such as “students may develop the mindset that

they can be successful in school”. Student outcomes are not aligned between the Theory of Change in the narrative and the logic model.

The logic model describes outcomes for Teach for America teachers and school principals that are not mentioned in the narrative (e.g., “80% of principals agree that Teach for America teachers...”, and “85% of Teach for America - KY members gain a deep conviction...”)

In the logic model, medium-term and long-term outcomes do not mention improvements in student outcomes such as increases in academic achievement or learning and/or higher retention and graduation rates.

In the studies cited, the applicant describes differences in achievement levels for students who received TFA instruction compared to those who did not; however, significance levels for these studies were not provided. Insufficient data is presented to support significant confidence level.